

JUNO ★ STEEL

and the



FINALE FANZINE





Three Times Nureyev Left Mars (and One Time He Didn't)

by DahliaSolisRose

one

Nureyev didn't know what he'd been expecting, honestly. A daring escape, a lover to show the universe to, a... happily ever after. Nureyev knew better than to believe in fairytales. Coming down off the high of Juno, he saw now what a stupid plan it was to begin with. Just because something new and shiny (and beautiful, and petulant, and morally outraged) had caught his attention didn't change anything. It didn't erase his debts. It didn't change the fact that he had loyalties elsewhere.

So really, Juno leaving in the middle of the night without so much as a word, let alone a goodbye or an apology or an explanation—he could have written a note at least!—Really, he was doing Nureyev a favor. Yes, this was surely just the universe's way of reminding him to focus on the important things, not pipe dreams that were more of a distraction than anything else.

Nureyev settled into his seat on the ship that would take him far, far away from here, and he immediately pulled the shade over the window. He'd seen quite enough of what Mars had to offer, thank you very much. He'd picked up a book on his way through the spaceport, and while it only looked mildly interesting he intended to use it to fill time during the flight. Perhaps that was his first mistake, not getting a more interesting book. Or perhaps the real first mistake had been giving Juno his name, or simply coming to Mars in the first place. Regardless, as the ship began to take off and Nureyev still hadn't managed to get past the first page of his book, he found himself absently pulling up the window shade.

Hyperion City stretched out below him, getting smaller by the moment. He

couldn't make out a single detail of course, but as he watched he couldn't help imagining he could see him down there. Juno Steel... Was he in his apartment, drinking his woes away? Was he in his office, working to pretend this never happened? Like it never mattered? Maybe it didn't matter to him, Nureyev would do well to follow his example.

Hyperion was long gone from his field of view by the time Nureyev closed the window. It was foolish in the extreme to feel a sense of longing when he pulled down the shade and returned to his book—a book which he was becoming increasingly convinced he wasted his money on—but as was typical with matters of the heart, Nureyev was a fool. Still, he tried to harden his gaze. He reminded himself of all the work he had left to do. He pictured Juno Steel, continuing his life like none of this mattered—because it didn't. He took every feeling of longing, every memory of soft kisses and softer words, every ache in his heart, and he filed them away. *For consideration upon returning to Mars.* Then he vowed silently and vehemently that he would never set foot on that red soil again.

two

Perhaps it could be said that Nureyev had a slight flair for the dramatic.

Well, alright, that could definitely be said and it would definitely be true. But as Nureyev reclined on the hood of the Ruby 7 and waited for the Carte Blanche's doors to open, he felt entirely justified in his actions. After all, surely what he was doing didn't even hold a candle to the *melodrama* of disappearing into the night without a word in a stupidly misguided act of either martyrdom or unmitigated cruelty and Nureyev didn't know which was worse—

The hatch hissed and started to open, and Nureyev quickly ran his hand through his hair one last time. He was not being petty, he reassured himself. He was simply... making a point. Which was something he was very good at.

“Hello, Juno. It's been a while.”

Nureyev showed his teeth when he smiled, relaxed his posture, raised an eyebrow almost in challenge, and Juno's expression was—was—

Nureyev had wanted to get satisfaction from it. He'd wanted to see the look on Juno's face—whatever it may be—and feel vindicated. He'd wanted to make his point. He'd wanted *closure*. Instead he met Juno's gaze, the thousands of feelings swirling on his face visible even from the ship. The lady always projected every emotion he had like a beacon, begging someone to come along and soothe the turmoil in his heart. He opened and closed his mouth several times like he wanted to say something, but nothing came out. That was what Nureyev wanted, wasn't it? To render Juno speechless? And yet all he could feel was... longing. That same longing he'd felt when he left Mars over a year ago now. That ache was back, and Nureyev resented it so fiercely he nearly scowled.

But he didn't, and then Buddy was ushering Juno and Rita onto the ship and the moment had passed. Nureyev felt slightly awkward as he climbed down from the Ruby 7's hood, and to make matters worse, the traitorous car gave a trill of happy beeps when Juno passed it. The detective didn't seem to pay it any mind though, he was still looking at Nureyev. Suddenly Nureyev felt suffocated under that gaze. All those emotions pressed down on him until he feared he would be crushed.

Juno was almost to him now, lips parting as though to speak, and—well, that wouldn't do, would it?

“Captain, how much longer until takeoff?” Nureyev asked briskly, brushing past Juno with barely a glance. He pretended he couldn't feel Juno looking at him, couldn't see that look on his face even when he was turned away from him.

“Not long, Jet's preparing the thrusters right now.” Buddy smiled over

Nureyev's shoulder. "Welcome aboard darlings, how would you like a quick tour while we take off?"

"Oh, um, actually I was —"

"Of course we want a tour!" Rita burst out, cutting Juno off like she simply couldn't hold back her excitement.

Nureyev was quietly grateful, because he suddenly realized that if he had to speak one on one with Juno he may actually lose his mind and do something unwise. Precisely what he would do he wasn't sure, but he knew it would have consequences he wasn't ready for.

"If I'm not needed, Captain, I'll return to my quarters for now."

"Of course, Pete. I'll let you know once we've finished takeoff."

He barely let Buddy finish before he was leaving the room. Somehow, even after the door had closed behind him, he could still feel Juno's eye boring into him, and he retreated to his quarters perhaps more briskly than was strictly necessary. It was a blessing when he felt the rumble beneath him that meant the ship was finally taking off. Nureyev didn't tend to be superstitious, but he was starting to think Mars was simply bad luck, and he would be glad to be rid of the cursed planet once and for all.

three

Nureyev was glad to be leaving Mars. In truth, he'd been glad to leave Mars every time he'd done it, but this time the feeling was different, somehow simpler and vastly more complicated than before. He was happier with the idea of leaving than he had been before, despite wanting to leave less. And yet leaving felt natural. As natural, he suspected, as it would feel to come back.

“Gonna miss you...” Juno mumbled in between kisses at the entrance to the spaceport. The lady had insisted on parking and walking in with him despite the inconvenience, and Nureyev could hardly complain. He'd been trying to work up the courage to ask him to do just that before he offered.

“I'll miss you too, love... I promise I'll be back before you know it.”

It was almost funny. When Juno had told Nureyev to go out and find himself, he'd hardly believed he could manage it at all, let alone dive headfirst into a new chapter of his life that made him feel alive and human in a way he simply hadn't before. But he had, and now... Now, suddenly, his life didn't belong in its entirety to another person. Now his life was his own, to do with as he pleased. He actually had space to listen to his own needs and desires for once, which was a novel concept he still hadn't quite gotten over. And amidst all this self discovery and paying attention to himself instead of filing away every emotion that didn't immediately serve him, he had learned that, surprising no one, Peter Nureyev needed to move.

He'd stayed with Juno in his apartment for almost three months before he started to feel that itch under his skin. He'd felt guilty at first, even though they'd agreed from the start that it wouldn't be forever. But Juno had smiled at him, a little sad, but mostly just in love, and Nureyev had booked a flight for the very next day.

And now, standing just inside the doors of the Hyperion City Spaceport, stealing kiss after kiss before he had to run to his gate, Nureyev felt that ache again. And yet... it wasn't quite so unpleasant this time.

“Mm... Okay, okay, you're gonna miss your flight if we just stand here—”

Juno tried to pull away, but Nureyev didn't release him just yet. He caught Juno's lips in another kiss, (which, despite the detective's protests, he melted into easily) and murmured, “Thank you, Juno.”

Juno chuckled breathlessly. “What're you thanking me for?”

Nureyev smiled, softer than he used to let himself be in public. “For giving me a place to come back to. Somewhere to... come home to.”

“*Reyev...*”

Juno's smile crinkled the corners of his eyes, now shining, and Nureyev drew him in for one last kiss before finally pulling away.

“Alright, I do have to go before you start crying, because if you start crying I'll start crying and that won't do at all.”

“I wasn't crying!” Juno sniffed, giving himself away entirely.

Nureyev had to resist the urge to pull him back in. Instead he chuckled, “Of course, love.” He took a small step further into the spaceport. “I'll bring you back something pretty.”

Juno took an equally small step toward the doors. “Just bring yourself back and you'll have that covered.”

Nureyev blushed. How delightfully novel to let himself feel bashful so easily, for the entirety of Hyperion City Spaceport to see...

Somehow he managed to break away from Juno, and miraculously made his flight on time. When he sat down he made sure the window shade was open, and he watched Mars out the window until it disappeared.

plus one

“Hey, Nureyev? Can I... ask you something?”

Nureyev looked up from what he was reading on his comms. He was curled

up on the squishy couch in Juno's apartment, the lady himself beside him with his head on Nureyev's shoulder. Nureyev had thought he'd been dozing. A Tuesday afternoon with no cases or other pressing work found them lazing the day away, and Nureyev was perfectly content with that. Even Juno, who used to get restless the second he didn't have a problem to solve, seemed to be relaxing just a bit in his old age. In the two decades Nureyev had known him—stars, had it really been that long?—he'd like to think he'd never seen Juno happier. And... hell, he could say the same about himself.

Except now, though Nureyev couldn't see Juno's face, he could see his hands worrying anxiously at the edge of the blanket over their laps. It was a riot of colors that Rita had knitted for them, and, Nureyev knew, one of Juno's favorite possessions.

Nureyev set down his comms on the arm of the couch. “Of course, love. What's wrong?”

“Nothing's wrong!” Juno said just a bit too quickly.

Nureyev's own anxiety stirred, but he reminded himself that Juno was just trying to communicate something that was clearly difficult, and the most helpful thing he could do was just listen.

Juno let out a sigh. “Okay, it's just—well... you've been here a long time. Like, you haven't left in... a while.”

Nureyev paused, trying to think back to the last trip he'd taken away from Mars. His excursions had become fewer and farther between as time went on, but he realized that Juno was right. It'd been... goodness, over a year since he'd gone anywhere.

“I suppose I haven't,” he agreed. “It wasn't intentional, honestly I hadn't noticed. I guess I've just... gotten comfortable.”

He turned to press a kiss to the top of Juno's head. The lady's hands had stilled on the blanket, and when he spoke his voice had a strange note Nureyev couldn't quite identify.

“Yeah... yeah I guess you have.”

“Why? Looking for a break from me?” Nureyev asked teasingly.

He'd been entirely unserious, but Juno immediately sat up to look him in the eye.

“No! Of course not, I—Nureyev, I love having you around. I want you around all the time, I always have.”

He sounded terribly vulnerable as he said it, and Nureyev cupped his cheek tenderly. “I know love, I was only teasing. I... I love being here with you. I love this apartment, I love Hyperion City, I love that Rita visits at least twice a week.” He chuckled, smiling warmly at his ladylove. “I count myself very lucky to be able to come home to such a wonderful man.”

Nureyev savored the way Juno melted under his touch, turning his face into his hand. He really was beautiful like this, open and soft. Then again, Nureyev thought you'd be hard pressed to find a scenario in which Juno Steel wasn't radiant.

“What did you want to ask me?” Nureyev asked curiously.

Juno's eye, which had closed in an expression Nureyev could only describe as absolute content, fluttered open. “Oh, uh—I was just wondering...” he chewed his lip for a moment before finally looking up at Nureyev. “Are you going to stay now?”

Nureyev wasn't sure what his face looked like, but something about it made Juno backpedal.

“I don't expect you to say yes! I don't expect you to do anything, really. These last—fuck, it's been twenty years hasn't it? It's been some of the best years of my life, 'Reyev. And I wouldn't change anything about any of it. You're—you're happy now and that's amazing, I'm so proud of you—”

“*Juno*,” Nureyev said softly, mouth ticking up at the corner.

Juno huffed a quiet laugh. “Right. The point.” He paused to press a kiss to Nureyev's palm where it was still held to his cheek. “I just can't help wondering if this is it? If you're... here forever now?”

Nureyev felt breathless suddenly. “*Juno*...”

The idea of forever was one that used to scare Nureyev. The thought of anything lasting for eternity, good or bad, made him antsy, anxious. Staying in the same place used to make him feel trapped, even if that place was a home with the love of his life. But now...

Nureyev looked around the apartment. His jacket hung on the coat rack next to Juno's trenchcoat. His favorite mug was sitting out on the counter. There was artwork on the walls that he had picked out with Juno, to decorate the space that was, by all accounts, theirs. He looked back at Juno, at his grayed hair, the wrinkles that had settled beautifully onto his face, the way his eye still shone just as bright and sharp as the day they'd met. He was gorgeous, and getting to watch him grow and change was something so precious to Nureyev. He realized he didn't want to miss a single second of it.

Something swelled in Nureyev, that ache that he had felt so many times before, but instead of the feeling being complicated and tumultuous, it was just... nice. A good ache. A simple happiness that Nureyev had grown more used to as of late than he ever thought he would, but that he was still endlessly grateful for.

Finally, after a long moment where he could've sworn Juno had been

holding his breath, Nureyev laughed softly. “You know Juno, I think retirement might be a good look on me. Who'd have thought?”

The lightheartedness of his words belied the gravity of the statement, but Juno didn't call him on it. Instead his whole body relaxed, and he laughed too.

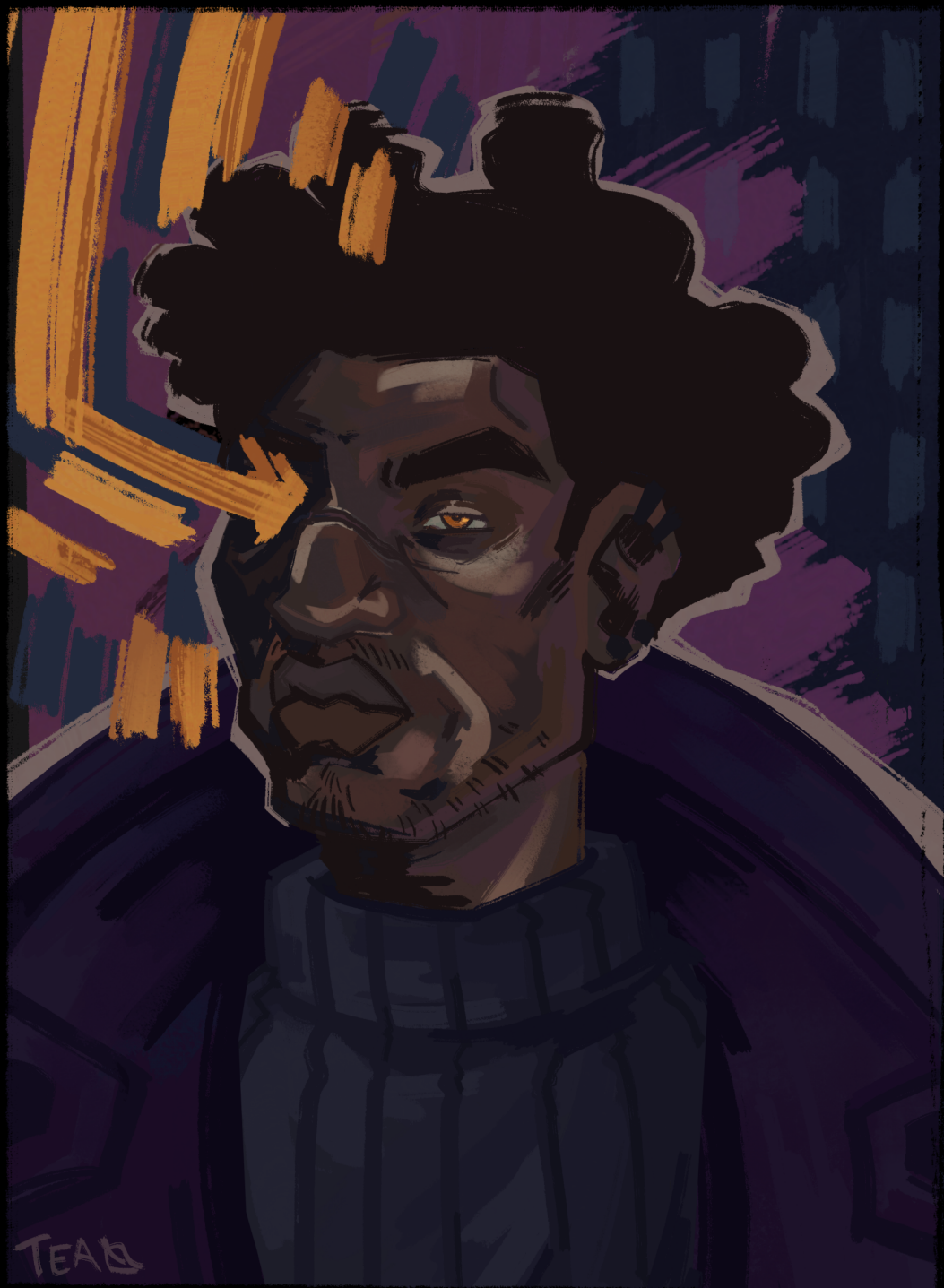
“*I'd* have thought. I'm always telling you that you need a break.”

Nureyev grinned. “Hm, perhaps.” Then he softened, and he asked, “But did you ever guess we'd end up here?”

Juno's smile was soft and private, but the joy in it almost blinded Nureyev. “Nope. But I'm *really* fuckin' glad we did.”

Peter Nureyev was a man who was always going. Leaving one place to go to another, running away from Mars, even... going home to Mars. But there was something new and almost exciting about *staying*. About the surety that he would wake up tomorrow and have Juno next to him, in *their* bed, in *their* apartment, in *their* little corner of Hyperion City. Coming and going and leaving and escaping and running away... it'd been Nureyev's life for so long. For his whole existence. And even with something to run towards, it could still be *exhausting*. Nureyev was getting old, a fact he had slowly come to terms with, and just maybe he really had earned some rest at last. He glanced out the window over the neon signs and buildings that scraped the dome, the red haze of Martian dust thick in the air, and he smiled to himself. Juno settled back on his shoulder, relaxed and content.

Perhaps, after everything, Mars wasn't such a bad place to be after all.



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CHAINMAIL WARRIOR ANDROMEDA



Family Game Fight

by fancryptid

It all started when Rita hauled the ancient video game cabinet into the mess hall of the Carte Blanche, the whole of it too shiny and new for something that should have rightly been in a museum.

“Where the hell did you get this?” Juno asks, leaning in close to get a better look at the neon art splashed across the case—newly renovated by the look of it, and meticulously repaired. He can hardly tell how old it really is, though it clearly isn’t something he would have played on as a kid. It’s not even something his mother’s mother’s *mother* would have used. The thing is probably worth millions to the right collector.

“Oh, you know...” Rita scuffs her shoe against the floor, all faux innocence. “It was just sittin’ around that old warehouse we broke into last week. She would’ve been wasted down there Mistah Steel, all alone in the dark! She deserves better!”

Juno’s muttered “*She?*” is drowned out by Jet’s voice when he chimes in:

“I helped carry it to the shuttle. I was an accomplice.”

“We were all technically accomplices darling,” Buddy drawls, giving the game cabinet a perfunctory once-over. “We were robbing them after all.”

“I doubt they’ll even miss it,” Nureyev pipes up from across the room, busy preparing a cup of nutrient paste. “The clutter in there was awful. It’s a shock we found what we were actually looking for, nevermind this.”

“I don’t see what the big deal is.” That’s Vespa, leaning forward to frown at the pixelated art lighting up the screen. “It’s just some old junk. Does it even work?”

Rita's scandalized gasp echoes off the ceiling as she rushes forward to wrap her arms around the machine.

"She's an antique Miss Vespa! I fixed her up real good too. We can play games on her whenever we want now, watch!"

She demonstrates while the rest of the Carte Blanche crew gathers around with varying levels of interest. It looks to be a standard side-scroller, the player navigating a small spaceship through the perils of virtual space. Ever the expert, Rita easily clears the first three levels before losing her last life, rewarded for her effort with the honor of entering three initials into the High Score screen: RTA.

"They only let you add three," she explains, with a thoughtful scrunch of her nose that says she's already figuring out a way to program around that. "If any of you get a high enough score then you can put yours in there too!"

"Fat chance." Vespa drifts away towards the door. "I've got better things to do."

"I never was a fan of games." Jet similarly makes himself scarce, Buddy right on his heels.

"I'm not so interested myself," Nureyev admits. "And what about you, Juno?"

"Definitely not." Juno loops an arm around Nureyev's, shooting him a grin. "But I can think of a few other things I'm interested in."

"Oh?" Nureyev laughs, pressing a kiss to Juno's temple. "Shall we go back to your room, where you can regale me with the whole list?"

"Gladly."

There are two new entries onto the high score list the next morning.

“I thought you said you had better things to do!” Juno turns from the sight of the number one name—*VES*—hovering just over *JUN* in second place. She flashes a sharp-toothed grin at him and raises her coffee mug in salute.

“Didn’t think you were that sore of a loser, Steel. Gonna throw a tantrum about it?”

“Is *this* why you left early this morning?” Nureyev asks him. Juno feels his face growing hot and raises his mug to his lips just to hide it.

“I obviously wasn’t the only one,” he grumbles, eliciting a cackle from Vespa.

They spend the rest of the day vying for first place, seeing nothing of each other but their initials. Juno sneaks in when he knows Vespa is doing a wellness checkup with Jet, only to come back for lunch and find his score already overtaken. The letters *VES* taunt him as a blurry old-school rocket blasts across the screen, sharp-edged little 8-bit stars blinking behind it.

“Oh, it’s *on*,” he growls to himself, slipping another cred into the machine to start a new round.

“I’m afraid I really don’t see the appeal.” Nureyev leans against the cabinet’s side, arms folded as he watches Juno progress through the first level. “This tech is so... crude.”

“It’s more fun than it looks.” Juno curses as a bit of something—an asteroid maybe, or a shot from one of the UFOs flitting around the edges of the field—nicks his spacecraft, costing him a life. “You just really have to concen—”

The sound of a metal door slamming behind him makes him jump, his virtual spacecraft exploding into pixels as it's hit again.

"Oops." The voice is Vespa's and absolutely void of contrition. "What, are you trying to *concentrate* on something?"

Juno whirls around on her, stomping up so he's close enough to look brave without being within knife-wielding distance. "Is that where we're at? You having to cheat to get the best of me?"

"Like I would need to cheat to beat you, Steel. Whose name is at the top right now?"

"That would be mine," Nureyev says, pleased as anything. He is in fact entering *RAN* to the scoreboard when Juno and Vespa turn to stare.

"You're kidding me," they say in unison, glaring at one another soon as the words leave their mouths.

"You were right," Nureyev says with a laugh, a sharp lilt to his smile. "It is fun."

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The highest score continues creeping ever upwards from there, and the fight to keep the coveted spot grows more cutthroat. Juno locks the door behind him one night to preserve his score until morning, only to find that a certain thief had somehow slipped in, beaten his score, and then left again with the lock still intact. Later on that day, he and Nureyev are both summoned to the med bay for two separate appointments that don't seem to actually exist while the doctor is mysteriously absent. They find out why, of course, when they rush back to check the highest ranking set of initials.

It should be less surprising then when *JET* is the top name come evening,

the man in question already halfway across the ship before anyone notices. “It’s a surprisingly nuanced flight simulator,” he says, and that’s when Juno knows they’re in trouble. Jet will wipe the floor with them easily unless they figure out a plan.

“You weren’t supposed to fight over it!” Rita protests, but they don’t seem to hear her, too busy debating the best approach to distracting Jet. Juno suggests a controlled fire somewhere, while Vespa pitches setting up an elaborate goose chase off-ship.

“He’ll buy it more easily if someone goes with him,” Nureyev suggests, earning him a suspicious glare from Vespa and a look of betrayal from Juno.

“Now you’re just trying to get rid of us!”

“It’s nothing personal, my dear detective. Why don’t we all pull straws for the role so it’s fair?”

“Like hell am I trusting you with it.” Vespa starts rummaging through the drawers. “You keep your hands where I can see ‘em. I’ll cut the straws.”

“You don’t trust me?”

“Not as far as I can throw you, thief.”

“I’m wounded, truly.”

Rita huffs and makes her way towards Buddy, who is watching the whole affair from a safe distance across the room.

“Could you try gettin’ ‘em to stop?” she asks, leaning back against the same wall Buddy is lounging against. “They might listen to you.”

“Oh, let them go at it.” Buddy’s eyes are twinkling as she watches the three

of them bicker. None of them seem to notice when Jet sidles back up to the game at their backs. “A little healthy competition is fun, don’t you think? Maybe I should give it a try.”

“Not you too!”

Buddy’s laugh drowns out Rita’s dismayed sigh as she wanders out of the mess and into the garage, plopping down beside the only member of the Carte Blanche crew who hasn’t been caught up in the mayhem in one way or another.

“The thing is, I know I could mop the floor with ‘em!” She tells the Ruby 7, getting a sympathetic series of whistles in return. “But then they’d just fight harder to beat me. Maybe I could just program the whole scoreboard away... but this old code is real particular. I’d have to move the whole cabinet to do it anyway, and there’s no way they wouldn’t notice. I thought it would be fun bringin’ that old video game onto the ship. At least half as fun as it was gettin’ it all fixed up! But maybe I shouldn’t’ve brought it here at all.”

The next whistle sounds almost like there, there. Rita pats Ruby gently, swearing the car feels warm beneath her touch.

“Thanks. I guess I’ll figure out what to do about it tomorrow.”

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“What did you do to it?” Vespa growls at Juno. It’s the next morning, bright and early, and the entire crew is crowded around the game cabinet.

“What makes you think I know how to do anything like this?” Juno counters.

“You don’t. But I know somebody you could ask who’d help you out with it, no questions asked.”

Everyone in the room looks at Rita, who quickly puts her hands up in defense.

“I promise it wasn’t me! I would definitely remember programming something like this.” She frowns. “I would, right?”

“It does seem to be working normally,” Nureyev observes, squinting at the screen. “Except...”

Except that the tiny ship in the game is now a shade of bright green that looks suspiciously familiar. And the high score screen is—

“Gone.” Juno groans, staring at the list that previously held the evidence of all their hard work. It’s been replaced with symbols that look kind of like letters, if those letters had been put through some kind of digital shredder. They twitch and glitch out, the shifting shapes and colors rendering them completely illegible.

But weirdest of all is the new *Game Over* graphic. It’s made up of tiny 8-bit versions of the whole Carte Blanche crew, simplistic in design but too specific to be mistaken for anyone else. Juno’s eyepatch is visible, for example, as is Vespa’s shock of green hair. They stand lined up in a row, arms raising up in unison over their heads as if to cheer the player on.

“I think it’s cute.” Buddy coos over the little cartoon Vespa, wiggling a finger at it while the real Vespa’s face grows red. “Adorable, really. Whoever did this has quite the eye.”

The in-game ship—no longer triangular but rectangular, more land vehicle than spacecraft at a glance—arcs over the pixel crew’s heads as the words *Try Again?* blink at the bottom of the screen.

“It might be for the best.” Jet watches the display, arms folded over his

chest. “Now we can play for the fun of it, rather than the thrill of the win.”

“But the thrill was the fun part!” Juno protests, huffing as Nureyev soothingly pats him on the back.

“I had no idea you were so competitive, Juno.”

“I’m not,” Juno grumbles.

“Maybe I did do it,” Rita says quietly to herself, voice tinged with awe as she stares down at her palms. “Maybe I was *sleep programming!*”

“Pretty sure that’s not a thing.”

“You don’t know that Mistah Steel!”

Meanwhile in the garage, the Ruby listens to the distant conversation and whistles contentedly to itself about a job well done.

HAPPY FINALE



Aureboxphe

Juno Steel



A Cheesy Spaceport AU

by DesertWillow

If Nureyev was honest—and he seldom was—he couldn't tell you which he noticed first: the cheese or the dame.

The dame was very handsome, with a well built figure and several scars across his dark skin, all while he looked at the world with sharp, cunning eyes that would make a lesser thief nervous. He intrigued Nureyev. And were they to have met in any situation other than a crowded spaceport's customs checkpoint, when no one was ever at their best and everyone wished to be left alone, he might have flirted with the handsome lady.

But it was also *exceptionally* expensive cheese.

Perhaps the answer was that he had noticed both at the exact same moment. Because while the lady was certainly good looking, he didn't exactly look as if he regularly transported a high-end heist's worth of luxury cheeses. It wasn't even in a cooler.

At the time, Nureyev had thought that was all there would be to it—a brief glimpse of a beautiful lady scowling as he repacked a massive amount of cheese into a ratty backpack—and pulled his focus back to the port authority agent he'd given his travel papers to. All falsified, of course. Despite the freedom that Nureyev acquired in the last few years, his name was still not something he handed over to just anyone.

He didn't expect to see the lady again after that, Cailleach's spaceport being as large as it was. So it was a rather pleasant surprise to find him and his fine cheese at his gate also waiting for the flight to Mars. Peter Nureyev had never been one to deny himself any pleasure when he could find it, and therefore chose an empty seat near—but not awkwardly so—the man who had caught his eye and settled in for the long wait with his preferred (legal)

form of passing time: doodling.

He started with a suitcase one passenger had between their legs. It was awkwardly shaped like a beloved Solar stream star, the zipper hidden along the mouth so the contents had to be “fed” into the bag. Bizarre enough to keep his attention, but he longed to draw the lady next to him instead. Alas, there was no way to do so without it being abundantly obvious and portraits were never his forte anyway.

The announcement that their flight was delayed came twenty minutes later. And a moment after that—before everyone had even finished complaining—the handsome lady’s comms beeped. After glancing at the ID, he groaned so deeply it was practically a growl and answered the call with an exasperated, “Yes, I have your cheese, Diamond. You don’t have to check up on me.”

Ah, Nureyev *had* guessed correctly; the cheese was not for him.

“I handed over your list to the person there. If I missed anything, it’s her fault.” A pause where Nureyev could only hear the indistinct voice of “Diamond” on the other end. Then, “Yeah and the cheese you kept going on and on about. The blue castle-whatever.” The lady leaned forward and started going through his bag.

Nureyev’s eyes flicked down. From his admittedly limited point-of-view, while there was a wheel of camembert and a decent sample size of a gorgonzola he wished to try, he did not see any of the Cashel Blue that Cailleach was famous for mixed in with the cheese the lady had with him.

“So, I’d like the creds for it back now, please. This cheese run cleaned me out. Can’t even afford a snack from the vending machine.”

Another pause, through which Nureyev could feel the lady next to him getting tenser and tenser the longer he listened.

“*What.*” It was said so flatly that it contained no hint of a question.

A short pause, then, “Yes, you did.”

A longer pause, Diamond’s voice indistinctly audible until Nureyev’s lady (but not his lady) interrupted with, “—Diamond, you *can’t* keep *doing* this!” His voice was getting louder, loud enough that several people were looking their way in concern.

“Diamond, you promised!”

“You did! I made sure of it!”

“And why would I do that?!”

“I know you did because I recorded you saying you’d pay— ... —*Because you do this every time!*”

“Listen, I’m sorry about all that. Sorry about your mom, about my part in it, and, hell, for all of it. But we’ve moved on. And that means our finances—”

Diamond must have interrupted him again, because he cut himself off, leaving that “our” hanging in the air. Was this his spouse? An ex?

“No, that means that our finances aren’t ‘*ours*’ anymore! There is nothing that’s ‘ours’ anymore! After everything, shouldn’t you *want* full control over your money?”

His voice went dark and low; quiet enough that likely only Nureyev and the person behind them could hear. “No. You know what, you keep doing this. You keep playing the ‘Hijikata left you broke’ card. And I’ve had *enough.*” Another pause just before he loudly yelled, “If you’re not gonna pay me, you’re not getting any of the damn cheese!”

Diamond tried to say a few more things—Nureyev could hear her shouting over the receiver—but his lady just yelled back, “Screw this. My cheese now!” And with that dramatic last line, he disconnected the call.

Nureyev spotted a fellow passenger mouthing to herself, “Heck yeah it is.”

After that explosive conversation, his lady was all but panting and leaned forward with his head in his hands, tugging none-to-gently on his mass of dark, curly hair in frustration. Nureyev’s scalp ached just looking at it and he wished he could pull those hands away and gently soothe back those curls.

Instead of acting on *that* particular urge, Nureyev reached into his own bag and pulled out the trophy he’d kept from this Cailleach job: a bottle of Château de Sucellus syrah he’d personally liberated from the cellar of FearrHealth’s CEO. He tapped the lady on his shoulder with the bottom of the bottle. “If your...*friend* doesn’t want it, would you perhaps be amenable to sharing that obscenely expensive cheese with an equally obscene bottle of wine?”

The stranger stared at him as if he was suddenly speaking ancient Martian. But before Nureyev could awkwardly pull back the proffered wine, convinced he had just made a fool of himself, the lady laughed, his mouth turning into the most beautiful grin Nureyev had ever seen.

“You got a corkscrew for that?” he asked.

Nureyev returned the smile with his own, brandishing the required tool. “It would be rather ungentlemanly of me if I didn’t.”

The person behind them turned and offered them the use of some crackers in exchange for some of the wine and cheese.

The lady looked at the rest of their fellow passengers. “Anyone wanna buy some cheese?”

The reply was an overwhelming yes.

Another announcement and their flight was delayed further. But the sting of disappointment was soothed away by a gate agent offering disposable plates and complimentary drinks to the group, and a pair of empty cups for the wine to Nureyev and his new companion. Everyone cracked into their newly purchased cheese with gusto, sharing it with all assembled. It turned the spaceport gate into an informal picnic of sorts that night, spirits lifted by some absolutely decadent cheese and generous neighbors.

“Guess you couldn’t help hearing all that,” the lady said to Nureyev with a grimace. At Nureyev’s nod, he said, “Sorry ‘bout that. And thanks.” He gave Nureyev a slight ‘cheers’ with his cup of wine. “For this I mean. It’s some damn good wine.”

“Yes,” Nureyev agreed, trying to ignore the besotted smile his mouth kept forming. “It goes well with this damn fine cheese.”

“I’m Juno,” the lady said.

“I’m Peter,” Nureyev replied. At least that much was safe to say and didn’t wish to give this handsome lady the fake name he was travelling under. He mulled over his next words for a bit, unsure if they would be too forward. “Is Diamond your...wife?”

Juno huffed. “Sorta. ‘Ex-wife’ would be closer, if it weren’t for the damn paperwork.”

Nureyev cocked a questioning eyebrow. “That sounds...complicated.”

This time, Juno’s huff was closer to a laugh, if tinged with bitterness.

“You’ve got no idea. I was a cop and her mom was my boss.”

Instead of letting his body tense up in fear, Nureyev carefully filed away the knowledge and asked, “The mother you were speaking about?”

Juno nodded. “Yeah. She trained me and set me up as her replacement as a wedding gift. Youngest captain in HCPD history.”

“What happened?”

“It was a setup alright. She was crooked as the stem that these grapes grew on.” He took a swig of his wine and left his arm crossed in front of him as he slouched down into his chair. “Figured it out right after my honeymoon when she tried to frame my secretary.”

““Tried?””

“And failed, thankfully. Me and Rita—my secretary—we stumbled ass-first into an internal investigation case and through just dumb luck, we helped bring Hijikata down.”

“Congratulations, Captain,” Nureyev said, ignoring how the title twisted in his stomach. Nobody’s perfect, he told himself.

But Juno waved him off. “None of that crap. I quit the force soon after. The corruption ran so deep and I just couldn’t... I’m a P.I. now.”

“Well, then, congratulations, *detective*.” Nureyev much preferred how that title sat on his tongue instead. “So, if she was your mother-in-law, then what did that mean for your wife?”

Juno shrugged. “A whole lot of misery and trouble. She said she was fine with it, but...”

“But it didn’t work out?”

“Cracked within months. That was several years ago.”

A different passenger nearby—a well-dressed woman whose hair was more salt than pepper—brows furrowed in confusion. “And your divorce still hasn’t gone through?”

Juno groaned and shook his head no. “It was already complicated since our finances were mixed up with her mom’s ill-gotten gains. The lawyers were still sorting it all out when—” He cut himself off. “Whatever, not important. Long story short: No, not yet.”

“If you’re divorced in all but name, then why are you buying cheese for her?” Nureyev asked.

“Because I’m the chump who believed her when she said she’d pay me back.” Juno sighed.

“You recorded her,” the woman said. “Sounds like she’s been pulling stunts like this for a while.”

“Yeah, well...” Juno stretched and leaned back into the hard spaceport chairs, his shirt rising a little to reveal a sliver of more scarred, dark skin. “Turns out I’m also the chump who let her get away with it out of guilt. I mean, I basically ruined her life. The public arrest, the trial and tabloids, dropping out of school...stuck married to the person who was responsible for it.”

Nureyev had a sudden, very dangerous desire to tell Juno just how much he understood that kind of guilt and blame—sacrificing parts of yourself because you felt you owed them a pound of flesh for another’s sins. But he *never* shared that part of himself, not even with those he had discovered in Vivopolis years ago; not really. Why did he wish to tell this handsome stranger about that? They had only just met!

—And yet...

He was saved from doing something very foolish by another in the group—a young person in a cat hoodie—asking about another passenger’s service dog.

The conversation switched then to lighter topics, and Juno and Nureyev spent the rest of the wait eating with their fellow passengers and complaining at large with the group about other family dramas, as Nureyev became more and more fascinated with the handsome lady next to him. In the time they sat there, Juno had offered one person tips on how to catch their cheating spouse in the act, solved a missing item case (the person had put their tickets in their spouse’s bag accidentally), and sold the bulk of the cheese for criminally lower than what he must have paid for it.

And with every story that was shared among the group, he watched the way every emotion played across Juno’s face and all Nureyev thought was how he deeply wished to keep talking to this man.

He even said as much and with Juno’s blessing, given with a flickering, shy smile, Nureyev asked the gate agent if their seats could be rearranged in order to sit next to each other.

Eventually their ship arrived, and the picnic broke up. The salt-and-pepper haired woman gave Juno her card—she was a lawyer, an expensive one judging from the card—telling Juno, “On the house. I’ll get you sorted.”

They gathered their things, boarded the ship together, and continued their conversation, the high-backed chairs creating a more intimate, private setting.

It took time, both wishing to speak of anything other than specter of Juno’s quasi-ex, but the conversation did swing back to the reason for the amazing cheese they shared between them.

“She made promises that she clearly did not intend to keep,” Nureyev said.

“Regardless of the past, she’s just using you now.”

“Oh, I’m aware,” Juno said with a low chuckle. “She’s been trying to manipulate me for a while—questioning my memory, trying to get me to doubt myself. Forgot I’m a detective, I guess.”

“You may wish to check-in with those around you; ensure she’s not doing this to others,” Nureyev said. “I know a con when I hear one.”

“Oh?” Juno asked while Nureyev’s mind caught up with the words that had just left his mouth.

...Why had he just said that? It was true of course, but revealing his criminal history to this stranger—a former police officer even!—was an act of madness.

Juno looked at him; his dark, intelligent eyes had lost some of their jaded bitterness and been replaced with a softer look, one that was searching for understanding.

Earlier, Nureyev had thought about revealing a different detail of his past—one that would show just how well he understood.

“A...a loved one of mine...” Nureyev took a steadying breath. “We were both victims of the Dokana scheme.”

Decades of hiding in the shadows and Dokana was brought down all because Nureyev had taken one wrong turn visiting Slip and caught onto their lies. After finally letting their loved ones rest, he and several others from Vivopolis ensured that Dokana could never do anything like that again and hit them where it would really hurt: their bottom line. He released everything to the press—every bit of corporate espionage he’d committed on their behalf, the human rights violations, their patents. Everything.

And while none of the victims’ names were made public except by their own choosing—a condition he’d made for handing over his information—

everyone knew of his story at least.
Including Juno, judging by the shift in his expression.

“Oh,” he said. “Damn. I’m sorry.” He might have been at a loss for words, but moral outrage on Nureyev’s behalf burned behind his eyes.

Nureyev gave a tight smile. “Yes, well... It’s easy to be made a fool of when love—even past love—is involved.”

“Fair enough,” Juno replied, tapping his disposable wine cup against Nureyev’s. “To finding another fool, I guess.” Then he tipped the last bit of wine back and drank it like a shot.

The reason their ship had been late became clear as they approached their destination: Mars was facing one of its legendary sandstorms. It was thought to have settled when they’d departed Cailleach but found a second wind during their flight, causing the ship to make an impromptu landing on Phobos instead with a projected leave time of the next day if not later.

“Damn it,” Juno muttered after the Phobos gate agent explained that they were not providing vouchers for any nearby hotels. “Guess I’m crashing at the spaceport for the foreseeable future.”

Nureyev gave him a questioning look. “I thought you said your finances would be fine once we landed?” It had come up when Nureyev tried to pay for his portion of the cheese and Juno batted his creds away.

Juno shook his head. “That was assuming I could call my secretary and make sure my client’s check cleared first. But the lines will be down in Hyperion during the storm and I can’t risk overdrafting. Selling the cheese helped, but not for Phobos’ prices. Don’t worry about it. Slept in worse places.”

“Nonsense, dear detective,” Nureyev told him while they headed for

baggage claim. “We’ll share my room; it will be fine.”

.

A couple of days later, Nureyev was woken up by Juno’s comms going off like mad; it was the first sounds the device had made since the call from Diamond. He ignored it in favor of cuddling with Juno instead, but the lady himself pulled out of his arms and Nureyev would not deny he whined a little when Juno’s warmth left the hotel’s bed.

His hazy, sleepy thoughts were jarred into sharp wakefulness by a new, unfamiliar voice after Juno answered his comms. It was shrilly loud but the words were clear even through the tinny receiver of Juno’s ancient comms.

“Mista Steel! Your cheese is everywhere online right now!”





Carte Blanche Investigations and Retrievals

by Scarlet_Trust

Carte Blanche Investigations and Retrievals. The sign's neon glow reflected on the rain soaked street, a wavering purple beacon amongst a dozen others. If it wasn't for the sign, Arden might have missed the office entirely, hidden as it was above a busy takeout place. In fact, they had already walked past it twice, distracted by the heady, greasy scent of fried crickets churning their nervous stomach.

In a place like Hyperion City, where the police were as inept as they were corrupt, investigation firms were a cred a dozen. It should have been impossible for an office like this to survive without some kind of presence or advertisement. Buried at the very bottom of the PI registry, it should have closed in its first week.

But not Carte Blanche, it seemed.

The only reason Arden even knew where to look was because his sister had heard the name at Valles Vicky's book club. In every official capacity, it might as well not have existed at all.

Maybe that was the whole point.

Closing their acid-singed umbrella with a snap, Arden stepped inside the building. This was it. Their last chance. Carte Blanche Investigations had to help, otherwise... Well, Arden didn't know what else they were going to do.

Arden stepped in the foyer, automatic lights switching on with their entrance. It was a narrow space, but the tap of their heels still echoed on the linoleum in the empty room. The security desk likewise stood empty, its

occupant gone home for the night. In fact, the only sign of life was the occasional flicker from one of the automatic lights starting to give up. A plaque on the wall read Carte Blanche Investigations 203, with an arrow pointing towards stairs that lead only to darkness.

It was only then that Arden was struck by just how late it was, far too late for anyone to still be working. It was a miracle the door had even opened at all, assuming someone hadn't just forgotten to lock it.

With a foot on the stairs, Arden hesitated. This was ridiculous, what were they even doing here? As dire as the situation was, surely this could have waited. They should go and come back in the morning when there was actually someone here to help.

Then Arden heard a voice, boisterous to the point of shrill, and loud enough to shake the foyer.

"Mistah Steeeeeel! You promised we'd be done in time for the '*Pride and Prejudice 22: 2 proud 2 prejudiced*' series finale. But it starts in 30 minutes and I'm. Still. Waitin'!"

Before Arden could lose their nerve, they climbed the stairs two at a time. An old fashioned glass door stood at the top of the landing, embossed with the company name in bold black font. Most importantly of all, the light was on.

"Clocks a tickin', 'cause we still gotta get snacks first and Mistah N wants Venusian for dinner—oh!"

Arden barely had enough time to finish knocking before the door flew open, revealing a tiny woman with rhinestone studded glasses and a brightly patterned headscarf.

"Hi! I'm Rita," she chirped, head tilted back to look up at them. Arden

wondered what she saw: several days of unshaved stubble, wrinkled clothes and messy bun that did little to hide how badly they needed a shower. Arden knew they were a mess, but thankfully she didn't comment. "Welcome to Carte Blanche Investigations & Retrievals. We're just lockin' up for the night, so unless this is a super important emergency..."

"It really rather is, I'm afraid." Emboldened by making it this far, Arden pushed inside the office. Even the thought of going home now made their palms sweat. "Or at least I think it is? It might seem silly, but please..."

"I suppose we've still got a couple of minutes," Rita said, her eyes darting to the clock on the wall. She waved Arden inside. "You can hang up your coat over there if you want, I'll let Mistah Steel know you're here."

With barely concealed sigh of relief, Arden nodded. Shrugging off their jacket, they went to place it on the hook Rita had gestured too. But they tripped, stumbling as something dark tangled beneath their feet. It was all Arden could do to avoid making a fool of themselves by face planting on the floor.

"Oh! Sorry, that's just Noir." Rita's tiny hand was clasped around Arden's elbow, helping to steady them. The black blur darted across the floor, disappearing into an elaborate cat tower. "He works here too!"

"I never was much of a cat person." Cheek's burning with embarrassment, Arden brushed themselves off. From the sheltered safety of a felt cave, round yellow eyes stared unapologetically back at them. The barbed tip of a tail lashed back and forth. "They're always so underfoot."

"Mistah Steel used to say that a lot too," Rita said, reaching into the cave. A soft purr rumbled from the enclosed space as she scratched the creature's chin. "But between you and me? I'd believe it a lot more if I didn't see them cuddling on the couch all the time—"

“Is Detective Steel available?” Arden pushed. They felt bad for cutting her off, but this conversation was going nowhere, fast. “I really do need to talk to him.”

“Let them in, Rita.”

The thing was, Arden had never hired a PI before. They didn’t quite know what to expect. But they had watched a lot of stream-noir growing up, the kind staring brooding detectives, steadfast and serious. The kind of person who would take Arden’s case without all the messy questions; for the right price, of course.

Detective Juno Steel—with his dark turtleneck, eyepatch, and shoulder holster—looked like he had walked out of one of those streams and into reality. He sat at his desk, his blaster and a polishing cloth set aside as Arden entered. His locs were pulled back into a loose ponytail, revealing a scared face and sharp eye that tracked Arden’s every move as they navigated the cramped office.

The room itself was actually a reasonable size, complete with a rather spectacular view of the city, but it had been so crammed full of furniture that you wouldn’t have known. A second desk stood next to Detective Steel’s in the centre of the room, with a mismatched collection of chairs pushed in front of them for clients. A rather threadbare looking couch was shoved up against the back wall, between a potted plant and a filing cabinet. Above the couch was a cork board, covered photos and scribbled notes connected by a web of red string.

It was the second desk that took up the most amount of space, Arden decided. Its computer was powered off, and its surface lost under a mountain of paper, pens and clutter. There was no way anyone could feasibly work through all of that.

Which is probably why its owner had abandoned it in favour of perching on

the corner of Detective Steel's far neater desk. The sight made Arden do a double take. They hadn't even realised that there was another investigator at Carte Blanche. Their sister had only mentioned Detective Steel.

He sat with weight supported on his hand, one leg crossed neatly over the other. Everything about him was immaculate, in the curated way a painted portrait was, from his fashionably swept back hair, to the glittering chain that hung from his glasses and the tailored lines of his wine red shirt, caught at the waist by a dark corset.

"Hello! You've made it just in time," the mystery man greeted with practiced ease. When he smiled, it was warm and welcoming in comparison to Detective Steel's scowl, however there was something about him that put Arden on edge. Maybe it was just the unexpectedness of his presence... or maybe the glint of sharp teeth beneath his smile. "How can we help you this lovely evening?"

"Just so long as it's quick," said Detective Steel gruffly. "I actually want to make it home at some point tonight."

The mystery man smiled, the corners of his eyes crinkling in a way they hadn't when he greeted Arden. "Never fear, my dear detective, we still have plenty of time to spare."

"Tell that to Rita," Detective Steel grumbled, rubbing absently his eyepatch. One of the straps twisted and he fixed it with a frustrated huff. "So, are you going to tell us why you're here, or am I supposed to guess? I never was actually any good at charades."

Before their nerves could push them back out the door, Arden sat down in one of the chairs in front of Detective Steel's desk. They clasped their hands in their lap, hoping it would be enough to hide the way they shook.

"My... My name is Arden Stanton, or at least it was. I suppose it's Arden

Knightly now that the divorce papers are signed.” Only two seconds in, and they were already rambling. Arden bit their lip, trying to regather their thoughts. They swallowed thickly. “I...I need your help finding something of mine.”

Detective Steel’s eyebrow rose. “I thought you told my secretary it was an emergency.”

“It is. I promise...or at least it is to me. Here.” Reaching into their pocket, Arden pulled out a photo and slid it across the table. It was of a wooden music box, with flowers embossed in gold on the lid. “It’s an Earth antique, quite valuable, or so I’m told. I’ve never actually looked it up.”

“What? Really?” Detective Steel grabbed the photo, squinting at it. “That looks like real wood. Don’t collectors go mad for that kinda earth stuff?”

“It is. But I never wanted to sell it,” Arden said. “It was my mother’s before she died, and my grand’s before that. That’s all I have left of them.”

“In my experience, an object’s worth has very little to do with its material value,” The mystery man agreed, sliding elegantly off the edge of the desk. “Was it stolen?”

Arden tensed as the man stood behind his partner. There was something about him that had the hair rising on the back of Arden’s neck. Something about the brightness of those dark eyes or the weaponized charm of his smile. It hardly helped that he was taller than Arden had originally thought. Tall enough to peer over Detective Steel’s shoulder to look at the photo without so much as craning his neck.

”My apologies if I missed it somehow,” Arden said carefully, unable to fight down their confusion any longer. “Detective Steel, I was expecting. But who are you, exactly?”

“My partner,” Detective Steel said, answering the obvious and offering nothing else. Behind him, the mysterious man’s face smoothed into glass, blank and unreadable. “He’s going to be helping me with your case.”

“Are you also a detective?” Arden asked, more confused than they were before. Maybe it was an unfair assumption on their part, but the mystery man hardly looked the type.

“I’ve been known to dabble in another life.” The mystery man answered with a stylishly absent wave of his hand. Judging from the glare Detective Steel shot in his direction, there was some kind of story there. One that only made the man chuckle, giving Detective’s Steel’s shoulder an affectionate squeeze. “But it’s hardly my speciality, no. My area of expertises lies more in the other half of our business venture.”

“What?”

“Carte Blanche Investigations and Retrievals,” Detective Steel said simply, gesturing at the neon sign hanging outside their window. “It’s my job to figure out what happened to your stuff, and I’m damn good at it. But that doesn’t mean I can get it back without pissing off a lot of people—that’s where he comes in.”

“I consider myself to be quite the expert.” The mystery man preened, examining his perfectly manicured nails. “Our track record to date is quite exemplary, if I do say so myself.”

“You would,” Detective Steel snipped back. But he wasn’t quite able to hide the fondness in his voice. “But that’s why we need to know what happened to the music box.”

Investigations and Retrievals. Right. Arden had wondered what that meant. It was little wonder why Carte Blanche operated under the radar, or why Valles Vicky of all people was so ready to recommend their services.

“My divorce was not” — Arden paused, biting their lip as they searched for the right word — “an amicable one, to say the least. I lost everything. My marriage, my house, my job. Even my friends turned their backs on me. All I had left was the music box, and an ex who knew exactly how to hurt me.”

“So it *was* stolen.” Detective Steel pulled out a notebook, scribbling down notes. “Did you go to the police?”

“No. My ex’s mother is quite high up in the HCPD; she runs the academy,” Arden said. No matter how many times they told this story, the anger never abated. It was like a splinter left to fester just beneath the surface. “I’d never make it past the front desk, assuming they didn’t find some way to take everything else from me. That’s why I need your help.”

“Yeah, that sounds about right,” Detective Steel said darkly, rubbing the line of scar tissue that bridged his nose. He sighed, staring down at the picture he still held. “It’s a family heirloom, right?”

Feeling like they were being tested, Arden shifted in their seat. “Like I said, it was my Grand’s. But it’s been in the family for so long, we don’t know quite where it came from. I had hoped to give it to my kid one day.”

“Until your ex threw a wrench in things,” Detective Steel said, his mouth pursed. He gestured with the photo in his hand. “Mind if I keep this?”

“Y-yes. Absolutely, of course,” Arden stammered, watching in optimistic disbelief as the photo was dropped into the detective’s pocket. “Does that mean you’ll take my case?”

“Yeah, sure. Why the hell not,” Detective Steel said with a shrug. “I’ll take any chance to piss off the HCPD. We can start next week.”

“Next week?!”

The outburst caught even Arden by surprise. They hadn't meant to yell, anymore then they had intended for their chair to screech back as they rose. Both Detective Steel and his mystery partner started, eyebrows raised in varying degrees of bewildered incredulity.

Cheeks burning with shame, Arden sunk back into their chair. They coughed sheepishly, painfully aware that they were losing their audience. This was their last chance, Detective Steel had to take their case. "Sorry. I just meant, surely you can start earlier? I... What if the trail runs cold?"

"I assure you, we are very good at what we do," the mystery man assured them. "There's no cause for concern."

"But what if—"

"I mean, we can start tomorrow if you want," Detective Steel interjected before Arden could continue to make a fool of themselves. But his surprise was tempered with skepticism now. The kind that Arden had wanted to avoid by coming here instead of any of the other, more reputable investigation firms they had seen. "But a rush job like that? It's going to cost extra."

"I already told your secretary, creds are no issue." Arden's voice trembled as they wiped at their cheeks, brushing away tears. "Please, Detective Steel. I-I know how silly this sounds, but that music box means the world to me. I need it back."

"And soon you shall have it," the mystery man said, his hand resting lightly on Detective Steel's shoulder. "That's the Carte Blanche guarantee."

"Or something like that," Detective Steel grumbled. But he didn't push the hand off his shoulder, not even as he turned back to Arden. "Rita will discuss payments with you and everything else you need to know. She's just out front. And if she offers you any snacks? Run. Unless bubble gum and

fish sauce actually sounds appealing.”

“Good to know,” Arden said, rising from their seat. In the aftermath they felt lighter. More steady on their feet. For the first time since this disaster had taken over their life, the finish line was finally in sight. “Thank you, you have no idea how much this means to me.”

“I think we’re about to find out.

.

The door closed behind Arden with a hiss. Even then, Nureyev waited until the click of their heels had left the office entirely before clearing his throat.

“Juno, dear,” he asked, his hand trailing from Juno’s shoulder to the back of his neck, rubbing gently at tense muscles. “Why did you say we could take Arden’s case so soon? I thought we had our hands rather full, what with the Carter investigation and Vespa’s birthday.”

Juno grunted softly, not looking up from the photo of the music box. “I wanted to see how desperate they were. Something isn’t right about this case, I just don’t know what yet.”

“You mean, besides the fact that the music box isn’t from earth?” Nureyev said, plucking the photo from his grasp. “I know my antiques—and my cheap replications.”

“That too... It doesn't make any sense.” Juno leaned back in his chair, shouting. “Hey Rita!”

“Yeah, Boss?” Rita shouted back through the door. Beside him, Nureyev winced at the volume, rubbing theatrically at his ear.

“Can you do some digging on this new client of ours? I want to know if Arden Knightly is even their real name.”

“You got it!” Rita crowed. “Just don’t forget, the finale starts at 9 pm sharp.”

“I know, I know. Venusian, right?”

“With extra chocolate tuna flakes on mine!”

Juno shuddered at the thought, but dutifully made the note on his comms before turning to Nureyev. “Grab your coat, man-o-mine, we’ve got takeout to pick up.”

Srw. Nitida Paradoxa

Saraswatan Orchid



Fig. 1

allB

Sarawati Nidtida Paradoxa, More commonly known as the **Saraswatan Orchid**, the **Shinning Blue Orchid**, or the **Outer Rim Rose-Orchid**, Is a species of flowering plant native to the Sarawatan Rain forest. The Species is known for its rose-like thorns, distinct smell, and bright blue flowers often described as “glowing”. Though referred to as an “orchid”, The Sarawatian Orchid is not a member of the Orchidea family, instead belonging to Aarkidea, a family of orchid-like flowers native to the Outer Rim planets of Sarawati, Brahma, and Renga.

Martian Mega- Heifer

D.Maritus Taurus Gigantica



Fig. 1



Fig. 2

The Martian Mega-Heifer, (D.Maritus Taurus Gigantica)

is a species of all-female Hexapedal cattle originally bred for beef by the first human settlements on Mars. This ancient species reproduces solely through parthenogenesis, without the need for a bull. Though primarily used for meat, dairy Mega-Heifers are also common throughout Mars and the Solar system.

awb

A Cry at the Final Breath

by ceaseless_watchers_special_little_girl

Slip worries about him, sometimes. Petya, that is — or at least, that's what Slip's taken to calling him. Petya always seems to think he's separate from the rest of the Pests, like he doesn't fit in. He tries to act like he's better than them, like he's superior, as if he doesn't care what happens to the rest of them because he would be just fine on his own.

That's probably why he doesn't like it much when Slip starts calling him Petya. To Slip, the nickname is a hand outstretched, a voice that whispers *you're not alone*. To Petya, it's an association with Slip and his friends, an insult, and his rejection hisses *I'm not like you*.

That's also probably what made him such an easy target for Mag.

.

When Petya leaves, it hurts, but it makes sense. Not because he's an idiot — the opposite, really. Petya was smart, and quick, and could steal circles around most of them. He could change the world if he wanted to. So, when Mag offers him that opportunity... well, Slip can see why Petya wants to believe it so much.

It doesn't stop Slip from trying, though. If Petya wants to change the world, he has to see that whatever Mag has planned for him isn't the way to go about it.

So, Slip tries. It doesn't go so well.

He doesn't see Petya again.

.

Seven years later, when Slip comes home to weird sounds from his basement, he groans at the thought of having to get rid of rats again.

But when he slams into the door, shoves it wide open, and sees Petya sleeping on a pile of sacks in the corner instead of rats scurrying away from it, he pauses.

He backs away quietly, and closes the door behind him, keeping the click of the latch as soft as possible. If Petya doesn't come out in a few days, he can go in to get him. He'll just bring some food with him to show he's not going to turn him in. No big deal.

.

It has been *weeks*, and Slip had an entire speech planned out. A flash of a smile and a quip or two, something along the lines of *did you miss me*, (though nothing quite that desperate). But all his plans fly out the window when he sees Petya standing there, his eyes squeezed shut, his chest barely moving with each quick breath.

He's terrified.

So, Slip begins with the surest offering of safety they knew as starving Pests. Food.

"I made some tea and I have a sandwich... well, most of a sandwich, anyway. Sorry. Um, you know, I was trying to figure out how to talk to you and I got nervous and I wasn't thinking so I kind of just started, uh, eating it?" Slip chuckles awkwardly, hoping with everything he has that Petya found it funny too. But Petya just stares at him with such intensity in those two dark eyes that Slip directs his own to the floor again. His hand comes up to scratch that itch at the back of his neck that feels like it hasn't gone away since he entered the room, and he fights the urge to turn away and cringe at himself. Instead, he takes a breath and dares another look up at

Petya.

And — yep, he's still staring at him. His mouth is hanging just slightly open — fuck, why is that so *cute* — but Slip forces himself to tear his eyes away from Petya's lips and up to meet his gaze. He brushes a stray strand of hair out of his face, panicking and tucking it behind his ear when it doesn't stay, and says:

"It's nice to see you again, Petya." Shit. That did *not* come out as smooth as he was hoping it would.

.

Five minutes with him and Slip's already a mess. Things were going okay, for a minute — he even got to insult Mag without Petya blowing up at him for it — but the memory of their last interaction makes things... awkward, to say the least.

"So... you've been more careful about your safety, then?" And that settles it, really. Petya hasn't changed his mind. He's probably still disgusted by the drugs. He's just being more tactful about it.

A small, childish part of him wishes Petya would just come out and say what he means. He goads him a little, tries to get him to snap again, to see if he'll give in and say the same things he did all those years ago. But to Petya's credit, he doesn't take the bait. He barely even protests when Slip grabs a bottle of pills.

Maybe Petya doesn't think he's disgusting after all.

.

Two months later, Petya kisses him, and Slip thinks he'll be chasing this high for the rest of his life.

A couple of weeks after arriving on Saraswati, Petya has become really skittish. Slip worries more and more every time he has to leave for a job or a meeting with those sketchy corporate guys, but Petya always smiles at him when he gets back.

Apparently not this time.

“S-Slip, oh my goodness!” Petya gasps, stumbling to his feet and running over. His hands pat all over Slip, his eyes darting over his body with an adorable crease in his brow. “What happened, are you alright?”

It takes Slip a good few seconds to come to his senses, Peter’s proximity has such an effect on him. Well. Perhaps that and the blood loss.

Slip tries his best to brush it off, to give Petya the benefit of the doubt, because they grew up as Pests, they know how the world works. Why should it be surprising for Slip to return covered in blood every so often?

But then Peter grits his teeth and tells Slip not to treat him like a fool, and Slip suddenly doesn’t have the patience anymore. The argument gets worse — Slip didn’t even realise they were arguing until now, but all of a sudden, Petya accuses him of murder, and Slip sees red.

“A killer, huh? You really think... you really think I could do something like that?” Slip asks, with disgust dripping from his tongue.

Petya’s face falls, and he takes a step back. When he speaks, his voice is quiet, subdued, and Slip suddenly remembers their first few nights on Sarasvati, when Peter confessed with shaking hands and wide, wet eyes what really happened on New Kinshasa.

But before he can apologise, Peter all but declares that he doesn’t trust Slip. That he doesn’t trust anyone.

It hurts, but it makes sense.

So, Slip resolves to give Petya a reason to trust him.

.

As awful as the arguing was, Slip is almost glad it happened, because now Petya is here. He feels giddy as Petya watches his hands fly across the table and declares himself Slip's good luck charm. Slip would die before he admits it, but he feels like Petya might be onto something. His tactic is foolproof, and sure, Petya being here might punch a few holes in it, but as long as Slip keeps his cool, as long as Petya keeps looking at him like that, it feels impossible for anything truly bad to happen.

He tells the truth, because that is what is done in Rangian Street Poker. He has nothing to lie for.

Until they ask about Petya. And Slip, high off Petya's admiration, tells his first lie in a game of Rangian Street Poker. It's probably a stupid thing to do, but they no reason not to take Slip at his word, and corporate big shots like these aren't interested in putting time and money into fact checking people like them.

And even if they were... well, risking everything for Petya feels like second nature at this point.

It's not like they'll ever find out, anyway.

.

Peter Nureyev's lips are on his. Peter Nureyev *loves* him. Petya is kissing Slip, Petya liked his stupid little ramble about knowing people, about loving people, and Petya loves him.

Slip thinks when he finally figures the formula out, he's going to feel something like this.

.

It does. Slip feels exactly like that. He feels dizzy and he's trembling, and he's laughing, and it's better than he ever imagined.

He's really done it.

Vacation in a bottle.

Maybe that's why he's a little careless that night. Maybe he's a little louder when he laughs in the streets with the man he loves. Maybe they draw attention to themselves when they stumble back into their apartment. Maybe Slip shouldn't have suggested they try it together.

He feels an inkling of doubt when he pours a pill into Petya's hand as well as his own, but then Petya calls him *my love*, and forget thoughts, even breathing isn't online at the moment.

They both swallow, and the warmth of Peter's smile makes it take a second longer for Slip to feel the chill in the room.

"How long should it take for the effects to begin?"

"A minute or so. I worked on that, too," Slip says absentmindedly, glancing around, but his vision's already swimming. Fuck, maybe he made it a little too quick. "Is it just me or is it kinda cold in here?" he shivers.

"Well, of course it's cold. You've left the window open."

All at once, a chill runs deep through his bones, one that has nothing to do with the draft in the room.

“I... what?” he turns his head, the window flapping in the wind, twisting in his vision, taunting him. “I didn’t notice that. Didn’t you open the window?”

His mind replies with a memory, and he frowns and clutches his head. *As a reminder: we wager in questions here, not creds...*

“Why would I have done that? It’s freezing outside.”

Slip groans, clutching at his hair as he tries to think.

Which means that truth is paramount. And so if we find you’ve lied...

It feels like moving through a swamp. Sounds are beginning to echo. He doesn’t know what’s happening, and it’s not because Petya is smiling at him, and it’s not because he messed up the drug. Something is wrong. This is all wrong.

“Then why would I have opened it?”

We will be forced to kill you.

“Oh. Oh no.”

Petya still sounds cheery, only a hint of worry in his voice, and Slip doesn’t have time to figure out what he just said.

“Listen to me,” Slip demands. But Petya is still laughing, and the noise that Slip once found so pretty is bouncing off the walls and blocking all his thoughts and taunting him, and he grits his teeth to tell Petya that no matter what, he *can’t say his name*.

“What?” Petya mumbles, and fuck, Slip doesn’t have time for this. He grabs Petya’s shoulders and shakes him, praying he’ll understand.

“Listen to me! Don't go under yet, okay? I don't have time to explain, but...”

The floor swims underneath him, and Slip stumbles, his grip on Petya's shoulders tightening to keep his balance.

“Your name,” he blurts out, “No matter what you think, no matter what I say, you can't say your name. Do you understand me?”

Petya mutters something, and Slip shakes his head, but it makes his vision swim even more, and spots appear. He's out of time.

“Do you understand, *Dodger?*” Slip asks, before Petya falls out of his grasp, and without him to lean on, Slip collapses next to him.

.

The last thing he remembers, is that he never expected to wake up.

He does.

And *everything hurts*.

Something is wrong. Something is very, very wrong, and he needs to get out of here. He isn't supposed to be here. He's...

In a PI's office, talking to a man with dark eyes and a sharp smile. Petya. Wait, no. He doesn't know this man's name.

But now he does. He's in a green car with Nureyev, a car that Jet Siquiliak used to own. The name sounds familiar to him, and a thrill runs through him, but that can't be right, because Nureyev had to explain who he was.

He's in a hotel room, his bones and heart ache and he leaves to the smell of

a city that is so familiar, but he has never seen this skyline before. A soft voice in the bed behind him calls out his name.

“Slip!” he cries, “Slip, you're all right! It's me, it's Petya—”

A gold dress, a jewelled globe, a kiss, a gasp, a pain in his chest. Those dark eyes narrowed and cold, telling him their business is over, and the fire in his chest refuses to believe it, but the ache in his chest knows it's true.

Wrong. This is all wrong.

Well, except the aching. That feels real.

Slip groans and comes back to himself with a start, and immediately wishes he hadn't. Because he feels like a *fucking* zombie. And, apparently, someone else's memories are in his head.

He opens his eyes, tries to take stock of his surroundings, tries to figure out where he is, what he's doing, how he's alive. Now that his consciousness is back online, he can tell someone else is trying to answer those memories for him.

Juno. That's what Petya had said in that hotel room. *Juno.*

Juno is trying very hard to tell Slip something. And part of Slip wants to stop and figure out how on earth they're communicating, how Juno's memories are in his head, but then he feels a flash of panic and he suddenly knows that Juno's blood is inside him, and there's not enough time.

Slip tries his best with the hazy memories and all-consuming emotions Juno is throwing at him. The emotions feel too big, too powerful, as if his exhausted body might burst apart at the seams with the weight of them. There are three big ones.

Panic, which seems about right. Slip's feeling a lot of that himself.

Love, which gives Slip pause for a second. Love for the man with the dark eyes. For Nureyev. Slip tries his best with his blurred vision, looking around the room, and sees the man who had called himself Petya.

He doesn't see Petya. He sees someone older, someone tired, someone desperate. But not desperate in the way that Petya had been, as a young boy, wanting to escape the place that wanted him dead, wanting to live. This is the face of a man who has given away everything he was living for. Once again, he's looking at Slip, pleading with him, begging him to come back and steal him away from this place, to save his life. But Slip can't do it this time.

"Slip?" Nureyev says. "You've gone... quiet."

The third feeling is anger. Juno is angry. He's angry for Nureyev, he's angry for Slip, he's angry for himself, and he wants to *live*. Slip feels the weight of the feeling pushing against his limbs, tearing through his cells, and he wants to scream again, but his throat writhes in agony when he tries.

Slip can't take this feeling. He isn't strong enough for it anymore. He's angry too, in a way that burns through him, but if him coming back and Juno dying are connected, only one of them can hold this rage, can do something with it. And it sure as hell isn't Slip.

A memory flashes through Slip, one that fits, that doesn't feel disjointed. Him and Petya, their last evening together on Brahma. Slip's last evening ever on Brahma. Soft humming, fizzing drink, and a dream laid to rest.

"Are you all right—"

Slip begins to play a song. The man before him has changed so much there would be no hope of Slip ever catching up, even if he could survive this.

But the way he looks at Slip, the intensity in those two dark eyes, is almost exactly the same. Slip doesn't feel the same. Slip doesn't feel deserving of that gaze anymore — he feels empty, like the lost love of a young boy long gone is all that is left of him.

Nureyev has to remember. He *has* to. Because if he doesn't, all three of them are screwed. And if he does...

"That song. I showed you that song years ago. And you said... I remember, you said... Our dream has passed... but it's still okay that we dreamed it."

Well, Slip was screwed a long time ago. This is long overdue. If anything good comes from this, it's that Peter Nureyev is the one to do it, and those creepy corporate fuckers don't get the satisfaction.

"But... are you sure?"

Again, everything hurts. But it's going to stop soon. Somewhere within himself, Slip finds the strength to nod. It's not his own strength, he knows he doesn't have any left: it's Juno's. He feels guilty for it. He feels even worse when Nureyev begins to sob — big, ugly tears, just like Petya used to. Slip wants to reach out and wipe them away, and Juno does too, and Slip feels even guiltier for drinking the sight in, relishing in seeing Peter Nureyev one last time, even now, even like this.

"All right, Slip. I understand."

Slip closes his eyes.

"Goodbye."

Slip feels Juno begin to fade, and he panics, wondering if the wrong switch was pressed, if his message wasn't clear enough, if some mistake was made. Then, Juno is gone. And Slip wonders with a sharp, stabbing horror, if this

is it. If he's going to live.

But Slip keeps fading. The pain does, too. Slowly, surely, everything goes quiet.

Everything goes dark.

The last thing he feels is Peter Nureyev's hand on his.

And then, he doesn't.

VISIT!

THE FREE
~DOME~



BENZAITEN

STEEL



PINK

PONY

CLUB



Shudel
Scribbles

Coat of Armor

by LetDahaka

Juno Steel is not generally someone who cares about fashion. Sure, he'll dress himself up nice when he feels like it, but usually he just rolls out of bed and puts on the first clean clothes he can find. He is however someone who appreciates commitment to the bit, so, when his brother told him "If you're gonna be a detective super steel, you need to look the part" as he handed over the most stereotypical trench coat Juno had ever seen, well, he ran with it.

The coat had been a gift for Juno from Ben as a congratulations for getting into the police academy-a real actual gift bought with money Ben had saved from his part-time dance instructor job and not stolen from the thrift store that almost all their other clothes had been nicked from. He treasured it for that reason-it mattered to him, that his brother had gone out of his way to spend his hard earned creds on him and he was determined to return the favor.

He never got the chance.

Juno was wearing the coat when he answered the call from his mother about what had happened.

It was the first time Juno had had to wash blood out of it, but it definitely wasn't the last.

He wears it still as he stands alone at his brother's grave and is thankful that tears don't stain.

The trenchcoat is a constant companion, a way of having a piece of his brother with him all the time. Juno wears it to his graduation from the academy. Is wearing it when he meets Diamond for the first time. He's

wearing it when he gets and solves his first case with the HCPD, and again when he works on his last.

He can't bear to wear it for a while after that. The coat was a gift to a detective, not a screw up like him. He hangs it in the back of his closet with his unworn wedding dress, another piece of clothing he's not worthy of wearing.

When he officially gets his PI license and solves his first case the coat comes out of the closet again. He finally feels like he's doing good, that his existence is worthwhile. He's allowed to have the comfort of the coat and his brother with him again. He may not think about Benten everyday anymore, but the coat helps him feel like himself again.

The coat is with him for case after case after case, and each time it's damaged or stained he takes the time to care for it-cleaning and patching it as best he can.

Then Rex Glass gets his cologne all over it, and the smell stays for weeks.

He complains about it to Rita, but the coat doesn't get a cleaning until long after the smell fades.

When Nureyev shows up in his apartment months later, Juno takes the time to change out of the rented suit from the party into his trademark coat, and Juno's not sure if he's dreading or longing for that scent to stick to it again.

He doesn't like that he has to take it off to play the part of Dahlia Rose, especially since his cover is blown so quickly. When they make their quick exit in the morning he's sure that he puts it back on.

It gets absolutely wrecked in the tomb.

Between Miasma not caring if she destroyed his clothes in the process of

torturing him, the actual torture, and the blood, he's not sure if its salvageable even before he destroys his own eye.

It's the first thing he takes off in that hotel room, and the last thing he puts on as he lingers for just a moment in the doorway.

After that he doesn't wear it for a long time. He doesn't feel worthy of wearing it or fixing it anymore. Rita cleaned and patched it for him to cheer him up, but it's always been a coat for a detective, and while working for Ramses he's never been further from being one. He's not got it's comforting weight while underground with the Piranha and Pilot, and he's somewhat glad it didn't get the chance to get lost in the Martian desert along with his blaster and dignity.

After Jet drops him back in Hyperion City Juno makes a point to grab the coat off the hook in the office before heading to the sewers. Afterwards Rita acts annoyed that she's "gonna have to clean it up again" but Juno can tell she's glad to see him wearing it.

When he and Rita are picked up to start their new lives on the Carte Blanche he's still wearing it.

The coat hardly counts as being the same one Ben gave him all those years ago. So much of it has been patched and replaced and bleached that you can hardly tell what color it was meant to be when it was new, but that works for Juno. A "new" coat for the new him and all that.

He wears it off and on during jobs with his new family. Nureyev is always arguing with him over the practicality of it, but he can't hide the small smile that Juno sees out of the corner of his eye every time Nureyev sees him wearing it.

He doesn't wear it to the wedding, but he does make sure to grab it when he packs a small bag to run away from Dark Matters with.

He's wearing it when Director W shoots him, and Rita isn't there to help him clean it this time.

The Ruby7 is though.

Ruby has a specific pocket of Juno's coat it likes to hide in, and Juno hates accidentally putting his hand into it just as much as he loves feeling Ruby close to him.

The coat has always been something that makes Juno feel like himself but when he becomes Max Action he can't wear it. It belongs to Juno Steel, not Max, and not having it doesn't make it any easier for Juno to not lose himself to the correctional facility. Rita and the Ruby have it ready and waiting for him after the rescue, and he comforts himself in it's familiarity as the panic fades and he tries not to think too hard about that very familiar feeling guard.

Juno wears it off and on during their recovery and the eventual face off with Director W, and when he leaves the lighthouse to go meet up with Mick he's got it with him. As he sits there with his oldest friend and decides to go after the man he loves, he dramatically throws it on as he races to the Ruby, and it does not leave his side as he chases Nureyev. He's even got it on under the spacesuit they wear to the trashteroid.

The Executives rip it off his shoulders when they first start their experiment and Juno is thankful Ruby decided to hide in his actual pants pocket while it recovered.

After everything, after he wakes up back in Nureyev's arms, after they escape holding each other and the Ruby close he realizes that he's wearing the coat again. The fact that Nureyev grabbed it during their escape means more than Juno thinks he can ever say.

He can smell Nureyev's cologne on it again for the first time in months too, even if the man himself has left.

The coat spends a lot of time in his suitcase during his long vacation with Rita. He insists it's because he's not working but really it's because Rita kept complaining at him for wearing a coat while on the beach.

Back in his old office the coat is as on Juno as he is on the case.

After the case is solved, after he's done spending time with Mick, after everything—Juno is back in his office.

The office might be the same, but the person within it has changed as much as the coat in his hands has. Sitting there, in his old office as a new person, he really takes some time to reflect on how far he's come, and the coat too. Like Juno himself the coat has been through good times and bad, fallen apart and been put back together again.

Lost and then found.

The trench coat has always been like a suit of armor, a watcher, a protector, a companion. It's kept him company when the brother who gave it to him couldn't anymore, and whenever he pushed everyone and everything else away it was still there. The coat has kept him dry from rainy weather and cushioned him from falls and punches alike. It's always been there, even when Juno felt like he didn't deserve to be anything, do anything, the coat has waited and watched and been ready when Juno needed it again.

The coat has been his shield, his place to hide, broken and beaten and destroyed.

But it's also been his confidence, his determination, his triumph—

—His will to live.

Its purpose has changed throughout it's life just like it's owner, and Juno wears his patched, stained, battered, beloved coat with pride.

When he opens that door, he's glad he's wearing it.

He's still a person who loves being committed to the bit after all, even if it's been a while.





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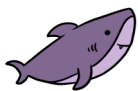


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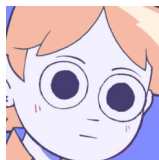


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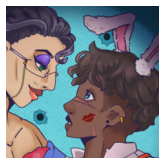


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CELLO

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DESERT WILLOW

PAGES 27-37

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FINLEY

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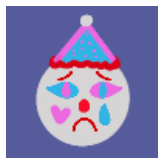
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JESTER

PAGE 65

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JUNIPER

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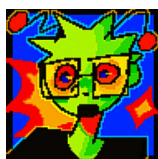
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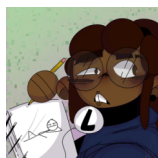


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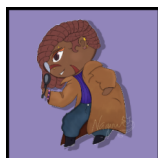
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MICHAEL

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NAGIRU

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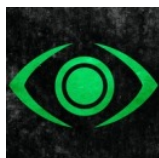


NAT

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NYX

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PHE

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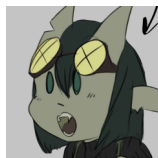
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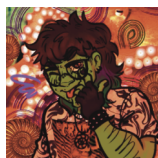


STRUDEL NOODLE

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TEA

PAGE 13

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THANK YOU

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